

Determining a Child's Developmental Age



Determining a child's developmental age is probably one of the most useful things we can do. It will tell us what age level the child is actually performing at, and we will know when our expectations exceed their capacity to deliver.

While the term '[developmental disorder](#)' is in widespread use, it doesn't tell us anything, except that the child is behind in their development. The world is full of these non-specific terms, most of which sound really great but don't actually tell us anything about the child's performance. Conversely, a child's [developmental age](#) reveals a great deal about the level the child is performing at, and why they are doing what they are doing or behaving as they are.

A child's developmental age reveals the point at which their development has been disrupted and it tells us what level the actual level of their baseline performance is. If we are able to see that a 7 year old child is performing at a 4 year old level; suddenly, so much of what they are doing makes absolute sense.

Most parents find this information to be some of the most useful they ever receive. While it is not uncommon for parents to know that their child is behaving like a much younger child, putting this into context and understanding that the child's developmental sequence has actually been disrupted at this point, provides a great deal of clarity around what the child is doing and how they are performing. Once this has been seen, it cannot



be unseen, and it is then glaringly obvious, that if a child is performing at a much younger age level, it's no wonder they are struggling in school. The obviousness of the child's situation becomes so incredibly apparent and we can wonder how we ever missed it. However, we need to realise that what we now see is not so obvious or apparent to everyone else. In fact, pretty much everyone else is stuck in the exact same place we once were, and nowhere do we come up against this as much, as we do in education.

Once a child has completed a certain number of [Visual Perceptual Therapy](#) sessions, the parents invariably want to work with their child on improving upon their academic performance. The most obvious source of educational tasks they can access is their child's school, but it then becomes apparent that we first need to determine what academic level the child is performing at. Most parents will then approach the school and ask them to A.) Tell them the academic level the child is performing at and, B.) Provide them with work they can do at home with the child, which relates to their academic level. However, I have yet to come across a situation where a child's school can actually tell these parents what level the child is performing at. It is at this point that parents realise the limitations of education to work with their child in a truly competent and effective way. It's not rocket science to do any of this, and most parents are absolutely capable of doing so, even down to determining what level their child is performing at, but the fact that education apparently cannot do this should be of great concern to us all. It means that no child is actually being taught relative to their level of performance.

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We use three criteria to identify a child's developmental age. I will use another in the [Visual Perceptual Evaluation](#), the developmental age of the child's [task performance](#) but, this will only confirm what the other three criteria are telling us.

These criteria are:

- Handwriting
- Speech and language
- General maturity

These areas of performance are particularly sensitive to developmental disruptions and that is because our performance needs to become particularly refined, in order for any of us to be able to do them, competently or well.



These are not simple or easy tasks to perform, and nor are they gross tasks; they are highly [refined](#) and sophisticated. Our skill base has to be particularly polished or developed in order to focus our performance and perform in these areas. We are talking about a truly subtle and expert capacity to engage in the world and if we compare the child standing and taking their first few steps, to what that becomes as the child ages and engages in the world, or to what the elite athlete is capable of, we will begin to understand how we have to hone our performance in order to do the things most of us take for granted.

Handwriting

As a child ages, their exploration of the world requires an increasing refinement of performance. We can observe the clumsy and ill-defined performance of very young children and compare that to the level of precision and control required, in order to draw and form letters.

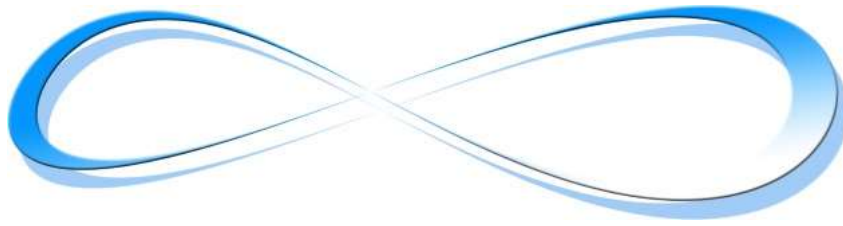
The 'thing' that allows our motor performance to become increasingly refined and focused, is our stepping up out of earlier [priorities](#) in perceptual performance and into the priority of visual perceptual performance. It is our capacity to engage with the world visually, which allows our performance to become refined enough to manipulate a pencil and construct letters.



But handwriting is much, much more than motor function. Handwriting is only ever a means of expressing ideas and concepts and our performance in this area is also reflective of ***our capacity to deal with exceedingly high volumes of [sensory information](#).***

Refinement of performance is always about [processing](#) and [integrating](#) ever increasing volumes of sensory information, and it is always about streamlining, precision, speed, harmony, competence, mastery, where vast volumes of sensory information are being channelled in such a way that the patterns of performance being generated, allow us to perform such tasks as handwriting, with ease. The level of competent performance any of us demonstrates (regardless of the task we are performing), always tells us how efficient and effective that refinement is. Any diminishment in performance is always reflective of a diminishment of what has gone before – sensory processing and sensory integration – because our [task performance](#) is entirely dependent upon what has gone before, and that is always that sensory processing and integration. The infinity symbol is extremely useful here, in understanding the intimate reciprocal relationship our task performance has to our [perceptual performance](#) ie: sensory processing and integration.





When we look at a child's handwriting, we can see their development age reflected in it. As a child ages, we should see a refinement in performance naturally occurring. If we don't, we will see that this performance is reflective of an earlier age in the child's development. We can then use the information outlined here, to determine what age level the child is performing at and, consequently, at what point their development was disrupted.

The other thing we can consider about 'handwriting' is sentence structure, the language being used and what is being conveyed. This too, can give us some great insight into the developmental age level the child is performing at.

Speech and Language

Speech and language is also a highly refined area of performance and, in fact, our capacity in this area differentiates human performance from that of other animals. Again, speech and language is a composite skill, requiring just about all of our faculties in order to generate it. Speech requires highly refined motor function and the expression of concepts and ideas, just like handwriting, however, we also speak faster than we write and convey far more through our spoken communication than we do through our written. We should never underestimate what goes into generating such performance.

Speech and language development can also be seen to clearly develop and grow throughout early childhood. Consequently, we are able to assign different levels of performance to different age levels. For example, most children of 5 and 6 years of age demonstrate a halting, fractured mode of communication in which they jump around all over the place in telling us about their experiences. We find ourselves having to ask questions, reframe sentences, provide new words or pronounce others correctly, in order to assist the child in their story telling, and also in the refinement of their performance.



It is this ability to associate such levels of performance with different the age levels they typically occur at, which gives us the ability to identify developmental age by ways of speech and language.

General Maturity

Maturity is also comprised of an eclectic mix of different areas of performance, and is also extremely sensitive to a breakdown in performance. We have all had experiences of suggesting a child is a certain age and discovering they are not. We may think a tall child is older than they are, but we also tend to association general demeanour, behaviour and actions with different age levels and to be quite accurate about these assessments. I recall one mother of a 10 year old boy and a 6 year old girl, saying that it was like having two 6 year olds in the house. Unknowingly, she had already identified the developmental age of her son, without understanding its relevance to his overall level of performance.



We may be able to identify some specifics around maturity and age but a general overview is all that is really required.

Overview

Fundamentally, all of our performance is arising from the exact same place, it's just that it manifests and expresses through the different avenues of our performance ie: the things we do on a daily basis. And, it's no mistake that we talk about patterns in our performance – speech partners, motor patterns, patterns of behaviour – because all of our performance is based upon our capacity to recognise patterns within our world, and to be able to turn around and also construct patterns. Ultimately, there is no difference between constructing the necessary patterns in letters and numbers that allow us to read and write and perform mathematically, and in constructing the patterns necessary to move, speak, think, or do any other thing. The only difference there is between such tasks is:

- The amount of sensory information contained within the task – the more sensory information contained within a task, the more complex it will be.
- The amount of refinement our performance needs to undergo, in order to perform a task.

Once we understand that all [human performance](#) is based upon that capacity to recognise and construct patterns, we realise that any struggle or breakdown in task performance will always exist throughout all of our performance. But it is not until we



understand how we recognise and construct patterns that we can actively correct these struggles and improve upon performance.

Kids are amazing little creatures; we only have to correct the skill base of most and they will do the rest. They are so involved in life and exploring it from every angle or perspective imaginable, that when we do change their basic or core level of performance, they will naturally go out into the world and make use this new way of perceiving. We then get to see the results of this, because their performance in the world will naturally improve; and it really doesn't take a lot of effort from anyone, in order for this to happen.

Summary

Once we have identified a child's developmental age, we can then start to look at how we interact with them and the expectations we have upon them. This often allows us to see that we are usually making demands upon the child that they can never meet. We also need to be aware that school is usually a nightmare for many of these kids, because they are constantly being asked to perform tasks that they just do not possess the [capacity](#) to perform.

The most common piece of advice I have, for the parents of the kids I work with, is to just relax and take a step back and create some space. The Visual Perceptual Therapy is an amazing way of correcting the cause of a child's struggle and parents then find they can then let the child demonstrate what they need, rather getting caught in a cycle of reaction and attempting to get the child to do things that they cannot actually do. Life becomes so much easier for everyone and it becomes so very apparent just how much that child was actually struggling, because we get to see the entirety of who they are and how they are in the world, transform before our very eyes.



The Visual Perceptual Therapy is available all around the world, via Skype. I offer an initial free consultation via Skype, where you can touch base with me, obtain a little more information and we can make sure the therapy is for you and your child. You can make an appointment for that consultation here



With that I would like to welcome you to my world, the world of visual perceptual performance

*Natoya Rose
Occupational Therapist*

